

ANNOTATED PASSAGES FROM
WILL YOU PLEASE BE QUIET, PLEASE?

See *Literature for Senior Students*, Chapter 8, VCE Literature Examination, p.221

Notes and annotations by Sue Sherman

This article shows you how to prepare for and develop an exam response on Raymond Carver's short story collection *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* It has two main sections:

- Part 1 shows you how to prepare for the exam by selecting passages. These extracts should have strong connections between them and reflect the main concerns of the collection as a whole.
- Part 2 contains the passages from the 2005 VCE Literature exam with detailed annotations.

A sample response based on these passages, including notes on each paragraph and assessor comments, is on pp.222–5 of *Literature for Senior Students* (Insight, 2006). Chapter 8 of this text also contains many general strategies to help you prepare for and perform well in the final VCE Literature exam.

Acknowledgment

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Part 1: selecting the passages

A very effective way to prepare for the final exam in VCE Literature is by going through the same process as your teachers and the external examiners: select three appropriate passages for analysis and justify your selection.

Firstly, re-read the stories, highlighting the main ideas. The set stories in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* are: 'Fat', 'Neighbors', 'They're Not Your Husband',

‘The Father’, ‘Nobody Said Anything’, ‘Sixty Acres’, ‘Jerry and Molly and Sam’, ‘How about This?’, ‘Bicycles, Muscles, Cigarettes’, ‘Signals’ and ‘Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?’ You will need to select three stories before you select the passages; two good starting points for this process are:

- identifying Carver’s main ideas
- thinking about *how* he addresses these ideas through the key stylistic features of his writing.

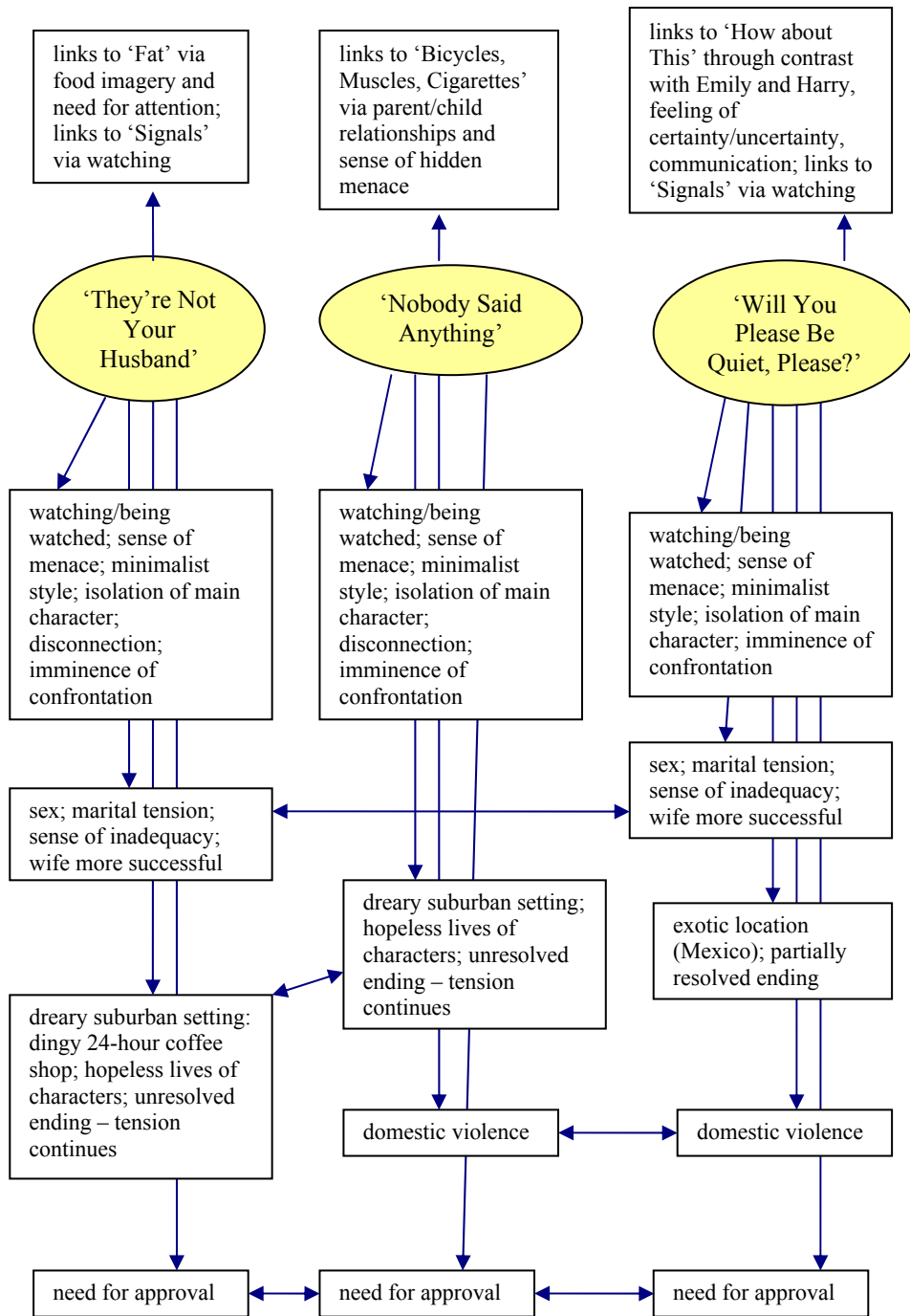
Overview of the main ideas in Carver’s stories	
inadequacy (personal/sexual)	(effects of) lack of communication
isolation of the individual	entrapment
domestic disharmony	disconnection
watching and being watched	self-absorption
denial	resignation/disillusionment
imagined possibilities	need for approval/recognition
hidden menace	unresolved tension
existential anguish	the outsider
Overview of Carver’s main stylistic features	
minimalist style	pervasive sense of imminent menace
unresolved endings	dreary/unromantic settings
subtle contradictions in narrative details	
hinting at rather than explaining meaning	
evocation of ordinary lives of everyday characters	

uncomplicated language of everyday speech

language that sometimes obscures rather than clarifies meaning

The stories you select will explore some of these main ideas and will exemplify some of the stylistic features which typify Carver's work.

- A useful discussion of common threads throughout Carver's stories, including 'Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?', is given in John Powell, 'The stories of Raymond Carver: the menace of perpetual uncertainty', www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2455/is_n4_v31/ai_17381912/print
- Identify connections between the stories: this will help you to think and write about them as 'connected', giving your response greater coherence.
- The 'inspiration map' below links the stories from the 2005 examination by identifying some similarities and differences between them.



The next step is to select the passages.

- Look for passages that highlight some of the main ideas and elements of style, and suggest interesting possibilities for comparison and/or contrast.
- The passages might contain a dramatic or a subtle revelation about character.
- Passages chosen from short stories might include a range of diverse characters who are unexpectedly linked.
- Brief connections to the wider text can be made using the material in the passages as a starting point. The passages thus become the ‘basis for a discussion’ (as required by the exam question) of other parts of these selected stories, or of other set stories in the collection.

Part 2: annotated passages

This section includes the three passages set on the 2005 Literature exam. The annotations in the text boxes indicate some of the significant ideas and stylistic features mentioned above; links between the passages are also identified.

1.

'They're Not Your Husband'

Food imagery in Carver often suggests self-indulgence – reflecting an unsatisfied need to be nurtured. Waitresses are important in ministering to men's appetites in 'Fat' and 'They're Not Your Husband'.

He took his time ordering. He kept looking at her as she moved up and down behind the counter. He finally ordered a cheeseburger. She gave the order to the cook and went to wait on someone else.

The idea of unobserved watching (links with passages 2 & 3).

Another waitress came by with a coffeepot and filled Earl's cup.

"Who's your friend?" he said and nodded at his wife.

Lack of honesty.

"Her name's Doreen," the waitress said.

"She looks a lot different than the last time I was in here," he said.

"I wouldn't know," the waitress said.

Lack of communication between characters.

Food imagery.

He ate the cheeseburger and drank the coffee. People kept sitting down and getting up at the counter. Doreen waited on most of the people at the counter, though now and then the other waitress came along to take an order. Earl watched his wife and listened carefully. Twice he had to leave his place to go to the bathroom. Each time he wondered if he might have missed hearing something. When he came back the second time, he found his cup gone and someone in his place. He took a stool at the end of the counter next to an older man in a striped shirt.

Plain, unadorned prose style.

Emphasis on watching. The description of Earl reveals his view of women as objects of sexual desire.

Slow narrative pace reflects the tedium of the characters' lives.

"What do you want?" Doreen said to Earl when she saw him again. "Shouldn't you be home?"

Self-absorbed (irresponsible?) parent – links with passage 2.

"Give me some coffee," he said.

The man next to Earl was reading a newspaper. He looked up and watched Doreen pour Earl a cup of coffee. He glanced at Doreen as she walked away. Then he went back to his newspaper.

Note Carver's careful recounting of small narrative details and sensory images to give sharpness and clarity to the scene, emphasising the slow pace of the narrative and conveying the dullness of the character's lives.

Earl sipped his coffee and waited for the man to say something. He watched the man out of the corner of his eye. The man had finished eating and his plate was pushed to the side. The man lit a cigarette, folded the newspaper in front of him, and continued to read.

Earl needs another man to be sexually attracted by Doreen – voyeurism?

Doreen came by and removed the dirty plate and poured the man more coffee.

Dreary job; unglamorous setting.

Earl's inadequacy revealed through dialogue.

"What do you think of that?" Earl said to the man, nodding at Doreen as she moved down the counter. "Don't you think that's something special?"

Attempt to connect with other man based on denigrating women.

The man looked up. He looked at Doreen and then at Earl, and then went back to his newspaper.

Earl's behaviour is ridiculous and inappropriate – doesn't pick up clues (link to boy in passage 2). Idea of disconnection links passages 1 and 3.

Need for approval – underscored by insistent tone, repeated words; link to the boy in passage 2.

→ “Well, what do you think?” Earl said. “I’m asking. Does it look good or not? Tell me.”

The man rattled the newspaper.

When Doreen started down the counter again, Earl nudged the man’s shoulder and said, “I’m telling you something. Listen. Look at the ass on her. ← Now you watch this now.

→ Could I have a chocolate sundae?” Earl called to Doreen.

She stopped in front of him and let out her breath. Then she turned and picked up a dish and the ice-cream dipper. She leaned over the freezer, reached down, and began to press the dipper into the ice-cream. Earl looked at the man and winked as Doreen’s skirt traveled up her thighs. But the man’s eyes ← caught the eyes of the other waitress. And then the man put the newspaper under his arm and reached into his pocket.

More food imagery – Earl overeating; compare with the character in ‘Fat’. Do their appetites reflect their need for attention?

Compare with Ralph’s attitude to his wife in passage 3.

Sexual undertones.

Earl fails to ‘connect’ with others; he is revealed as a pathetic, inadequate character, unsuccessful as salesman and husband. What is suggested about human nature/society through this character?

2.

'Nobody Said Anything'

Brief connection to idea of unobserved watching.

I saw George riding his bicycle at the other end of the street. He didn't see me. I went around to the back to take off my boots. I unslung the creel so I could raise the lid and get set to march into the house, grinning.

Food imagery here suggests a lack of nurturing – the mother's attention is often on her own problems. Difficulties for some women in balancing domesticity and employment – compare with passage 1 and contrast with passage 3.

I heard their voices and looked through the window. They were sitting at the table. Smoke was all over the kitchen. I saw it was coming from a pan on the burner. But neither of them paid any attention.

Unobserved watching again – links with passages 1 and 3.

"What I'm telling you is the gospel truth," he said. "What do kids know? You'll see."

Marital disharmony; also, a characteristic of Carver's style: the evocation of a sense of hidden menace. The reader is disturbed by unexplained narrative details – the implied violence adds to a sense of menace.

She said, "I'll see nothing. If I thought that, I'd rather see them dead first."

He said, "What's the matter with you? You better be careful what you say!"

She started to cry. He smashed out a cigarette in the ashtray and stood up.

Domestic tension suggested by violence of 'smashed'.

"Edna, do you know this pan is burning up?" he said.

Food imagery; violence reflects unresolved tensions.

She looked at the pan. She pushed her chair back and grabbed the pan by its handle and threw it against the wall over the sink.

He said, "Have you lost your mind? Look what you've done!" He took a dish cloth and began to wipe up stuff from the pan.

I opened the back door. I started grinning. I said, "You won't believe what I caught at Birch Creek. Just look. Look here. Look at this. Look what I caught."

Insistent, repetitive dialogue – links with passage 1.

My legs shook. I could hardly stand. I held the creel out to her, and she finally looked in. "Oh, oh, my God! What is it? A snake! What is it? Please, please take it out before I throw up."

Need for attention, approval – links with passage 1.

"Take it out!" he screamed. "Didn't you hear what she said? Take it out of here!" he screamed.

Lack of communication – links with passages 1 and 3.

I said, "But look, Dad. Look what it is."

He said, "I don't want to look."

Inappropriate behaviour – unlike Earl (passage 1), the boy is aware; but like Earl, he is unable to stop. The same insistent tone, repetitive language and sense of desperation are used here.

I said, "It's a gigantic summer steelhead from Birch Creek. Look! Isn't he something? It's a monster! I chased him up and down the creek like a madman!" My voice was crazy. But I could not stop. "There was another one, too," I hurried on. "A green one. I swear! It was green! Have you ever seen a green one?"

Animal imagery.

Link to story's earlier narrative details – the boy's desire to return to the security of childhood.

He looked into the creel and his mouth fell open.

He screamed, "Take that goddamn thing out of here! What in the hell is the matter with you? Take it the hell out of the kitchen and throw it in the goddamn garbage!"

Disconnection – links with passages 1 and 3. Insensitive, self-absorbed adults – links with passage 3.

I went back outside. I looked into the creel. What was there looked silver under the porch light. What was there filled the creel.

Slow pace of action (why?) – links with passage 1.

I lifted him out. I held him. I held that half of him.

Sentence structure interesting here. Sympathy evoked for narrator – contrast with Earl in passage 1. Unresolved ending of story. What observations about human nature and society are evident in this story?

3.

'Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?'

For their honeymoon they drove to Guadalajara, and while they both enjoyed visiting the decayed churches and the poorly lighted museums and the afternoons they spent shopping and exploring in the marketplace, Ralph was secretly appalled by the squalor and open lust he saw and was anxious to return to the safety of California. But the one vision he would always remember and which disturbed him most of all had nothing to do with Mexico. It was late afternoon, almost evening, and Marian was leaning motionless on her arms over the ironwork balustrade of their rented *casita* as Ralph came up the dusty road below. Her hair was long and hung down in front over her shoulders, and she was looking away from him, staring at something in the distance. She wore a white blouse with a bright red scarf at her throat, and he could see her breasts pushing against the white cloth. He had a bottle of dark, unlabeled wine under his arm, and the whole incident put Ralph in mind of something from a film, an intensely dramatic moment into which Marian could be fitted but he could not.

Before they left for their honeymoon they had accepted positions at a high school in Eureka, a town in the lumbering region in the northern part of the state. After a year, when they were sure the school and the town were exactly what they wanted to settle down to, they made a payment on a house in the Fire Hill district. Ralph felt, without really thinking about it, that he and Marian understood each other perfectly – as well, at least, as any two people might. Moreover, Ralph felt he understood himself – what he could do, what he could not do, and where he was headed with the prudent measure of himself that he made.

Their two children, Dorothea and Robert, were now five and four years old. A few months after Robert was born, Marian was offered a post as a French and English instructor at the junior college at the edge of town, and Ralph had stayed on at the high school. They considered themselves a happy couple, with only a single injury to their marriage, and that was well in the past, two years ago this winter. It was something they had never talked about since. But Ralph thought about it sometimes – indeed, he was willing to admit he thought about it more and more. Increasingly, ghastly images would be projected on his eyes, certain unthinkable particularities. For he had taken it into his head that his wife had once betrayed him with a man named Mitchell Anderson.

Exotic location – contrast with the dreary settings in passages 1 and 2.

Contrast with Earl's attitude to sex in passage 1.

Comment on Ralph's (inhibited?) personality?

White implies sexual inexperience, whereas red suggests sexual passion.

Disconnection between husband wife – links to passages 1 and 2. Contrast between eloquent and descriptive style of authorial voice and the plain-speaking, often inadequate voices of the characters evident in dialogue.

Ralph's narrative perspective (omniscient narrator revealing Ralph's poor understanding of his marriage): compare with other marital relationships, such as in passages 1 and 3.

Ironic, given his violence when Marian admits her infidelity.

Marian more successful (compare with Doreen)? Ralph's feelings of inadequacy are both professional and sexual – links with passage 1.

Imagination – used by Ralph to increase his misery and insecurity. Contrast with the boy's imagined sexual encounter with an older woman in 'Nobody Said Anything', and with Harry in 'How About This?'

Unobserved watching – links with passages 1 and 2.

Alcohol imagery (drinking problem earlier and binge later; disconnection from reality).

Fantasy world of Hollywood movies – shows Ralph's capacity for disconnection from the real world?

Compare this 'certainty' with the uncertainty of the couple in 'How about This?' Ralph and Marian have closed down opportunities for communication, whereas Harry and Emily seem more open and united. Mention existentialism?

Ralph's limited understanding of himself – his inability to come to terms with Marian's infidelity and his own sexual inadequacy – links with passage 1?

Marital disharmony. Later he exaggerates the amount of time that has passed – 'three or four years' – what are the implications of this?

Lack of communication.

Infidelity.

About the author

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